WILLIAM NICHOLSON

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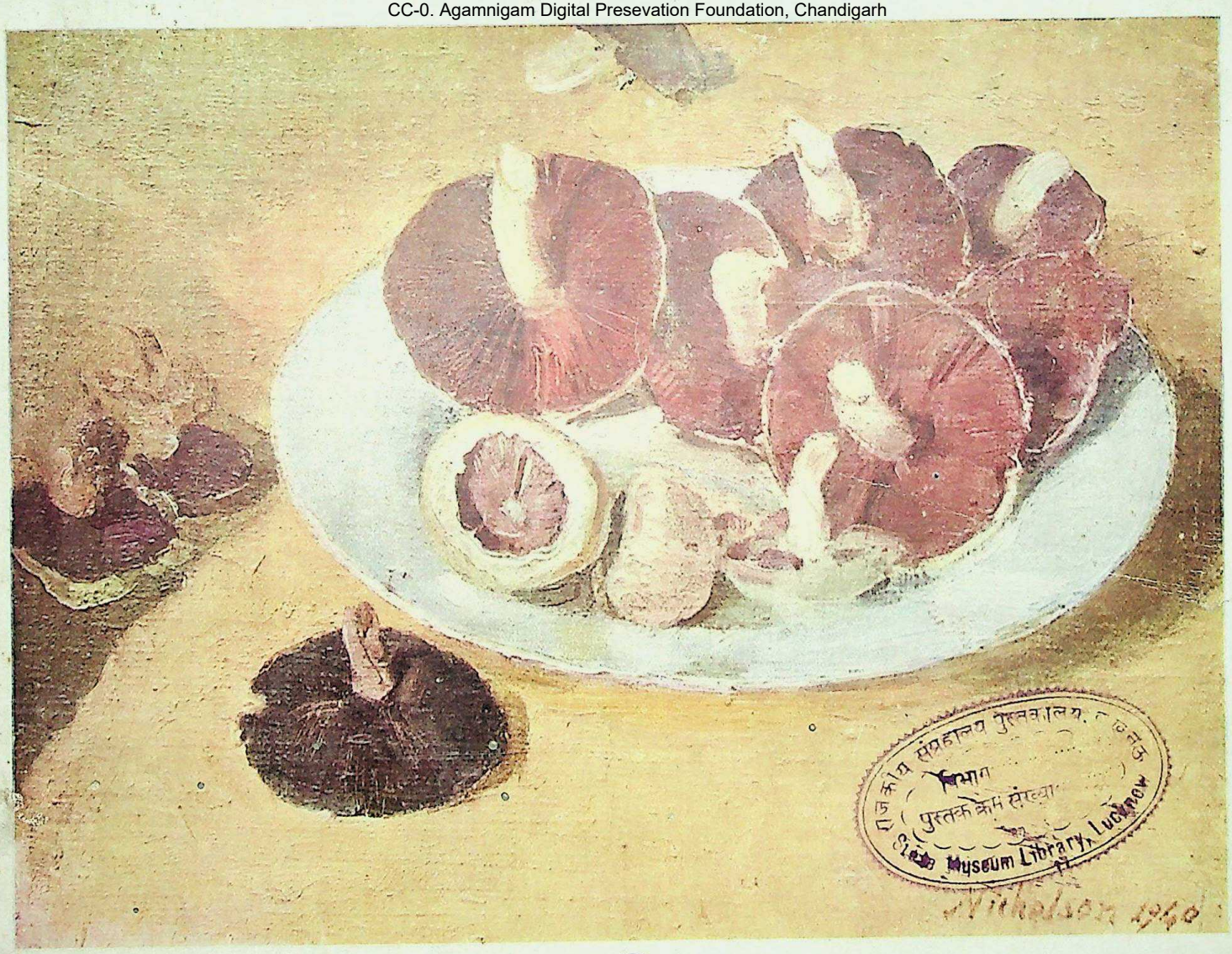

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The Penguin Modern Painters — *Three Shillings and Sixpence*

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ROBERT NICHOLS

WILLIAM NICHOLSON

PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE PENGUIN MODERN PAINTERS

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WILLIAM NICHOLSON

WILLIAM NICHOLSON was born at Newark-on-Trent in 1865, the son of William Newzam Nicholson and his wife Anne Elizabeth (*nee* Prior). He early displayed his creative gifts and was sent to the Herkomer School of Art. His study therein was, however, of brief duration, for in his own words he was "chucked out for bad work and poor attendance". During his school days he had special lessons from Cubley of Newark, who had been trained by Sir William Beechey, who was a pupil of Sir Joshua Reynolds. In his early twenties he went to Julien's in Paris, where he worked on and off for a year, but derived little benefit, since the classes were much too crowded and the circumstances difficult. On his return to England he married the sister of the late James Pryde. Calling themselves J. and W. Beggarstaff, Nicholson and Pryde worked on a series of posters which created new æsthetic standards in commercial art. Nicholson considers that among other advantages gained from this work was knowledge of the use of pattern. He then turned to woodcuts and produced *Nicholson's Alphabet*, *London Types*, *The Square Book of Animals*, *The Almanach of Twelve Sports* (with verses by Kipling), *Characters of Romance;* and two series of *Twelve Portraits*, well-known figures of the period (Lord Roberts, Sarah Bernhardt, Kipling, Whistler), and (plate 2), the famous *Queen Victoria*, and a folio of the Oxford Colleges. The woodcuts were works of striking individuality and of singular assurance of execution, an assurance all the more remarkable in that Nicholson hadn't (as he hasn't since) received any instruction whatever in the use of this medium, nor, indeed, so much as watched another artist at work in it. These were days very much in the great and honourable tradi-

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tion of narrow circumstance, youthful fortitude and unceasing application. (For lack of a press Nicholson used to print by treading on the block.) But Nicholson was then, as he is today, one of those who work "without haste and without rest". Thanks to these woodcuts, he was able to return to his sovereign passion — paint. A stroke of deserved good fortune befell him. The proprietors of the Stafford Street Gallery, under the direction of the late Mr. Merrill, whose intelligent self-interest and personal sympathy he still recalls with gratitude, made him an offer of a retaining fee in return for his entire output. As shrewd in their estimate of character as sound in their judgment of painting, these dealers had the wit to see that this gifted and industrious young man desired nothing so much as to be free to paint what he liked in his own time and after his own fashion, and that his devotion to his profession was such that he would be little likely to abuse such freedom once it was his. They were not mistaken. The arrangement continued for several years to the satisfaction of both parties, for Nicholson appreciated the exceptional nature of his opportunity, and the proprietors of the Stafford Gallery had the sagacity never to exert a pressure which might result in overproduction and consequent loss of quality. By the time the arrangement was discontinued Nicholson had become an established man and the Stafford Galleries had gained both in ledger profit and reputation for discerning enterprise. During this Stafford Gallery period Nicholson's subjects were very varied and included the well-known portrait of the child Rosy Craig (known as *Rosy*), the Morris Dancer pictures (plate 4), landscapes and still-lifes.

Since then the artist has not turned aside from ceaseless painting save to indulge in occasional highly successful excursions into other media — for instance, woodcuts, stained glass, stage design, a few water colours, and once, at least, the design and supervision of the execution of a large rag rug. This last is of special interest to those concerned with Women's Clubs and village welfare as proving that the creation of large, highly original and elaborate rugs can be undertaken and successfully executed by persons with but little previous experience of large enterprises provided the original design be the work of an eminent artist and

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that this artist stands by to supervise actual production. (When later some of the same group independently attempted works in this sort the results were less fortunate.) This venture seems to indicate possibilities of interesting post-war development among such groups. The Nicholson rug is a remarkable achievement in a medium not previously associated with ambitious design and splendour of effect.

But among such "excursions" the artist's woodcuts must be accounted of chief importance.

It was, Nicholson says, the primitive quality of this medium which made so immediate an appeal to him that, as above related, he fell to work without previous instruction and with the happiest results. Considering the problem he had posed himself — his approach to art is always that of a man for whom the problem is a problem of simple (and consequently succinct and subtle) statement — he took counsel with himself as to what renders a willow-pattern plate so universally attractive. He concluded it to be the balance of the darks and the lights. It was this knowledge, implemented by the knowledge of pattern gained from poster designing, which he brought into play in making his woodcuts, wherein an extraordinary degree of decorative quality and continuous visual vitality is achieved by a severe and sagacious elimination of the unnecessary.

Nicholson tends to fight shy of talking about painting. "The technical side is for painters", and "as for painting at large . . . !" his face, puckering up in a laugh, indicates depreciation of the oracular. The subject's too large. At best he "can only talk about his sort of painting", by which he means "the art of painting I have most practised. Which doesn't, of course, mean that there aren't many other sorts — and of the most admirable — but only that this is the sort of which I have most experience and therefore feel most qualified to speak". "And, really", he insists, the best contribution he personally can make to "talk about this sort of painting" "is to invite the reader to look at his pictures" — he shrugs — "such as they are". He sighs, and it is plain he would much rather be getting on with his painting than talking about it. Well, as for "his sort of painting", what shall we call it? How about "decorative realism", the writer

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hazards, as, for want of better, the sort of term which might cover it or a large part of it? But directly an attempt is made to pop this sort of butterfly net over "his sort of painting" the artist begins to jib. It is plain that words — so vague as compared with a stroke of the brush! — trouble him as they trouble many composers and most painters. The word "realism" for instance. An absolute "realism" would include everything: it would be camera-work, a coloured photograph, a literal and unimaginative record, the characteristic of the camera being a crystal eye with no imagination behind it. And art, you know, isn't like that. "One of its great principles is simplification" — and simplification implies selection and convention and regard for the medium — "when I get a nice canvas I consider the quality of the material I shall place upon it. For every canvas there is the exact material — for instance, a coarse-grained surface demands a different material from a fine. By the way, there's more in all this than is sometimes fancied. I find I can get nicely into tune for painting by preparing a canvas — I take a lot of trouble over this — other than the one I am actually about to paint on". "What were we talking about? Ah, yes, 'realism'. If we must use the term, let us speak of a 'controlled realism'." The business of an artist practising such realism is "to communicate what in the natural is irresistible to him and what in the act of communication in a particular medium is pleasurable". The writer quotes a passage from *Delacroix's Journal* (September 18th, 1847): "Painting is the trade that takes longest to learn and is the most difficult. It demands not only the erudition of a composer but execution like that of a violinist". "Did Delacroix say that? Yes, I agree to that". For Nicholson believes that some of the pleasure of succinct execution — the sweeps of white, for instance, in the foreground of *Harbour in Snow* (plate 15) — long, deft strokes (a risky proceeding) of the palette knife — can be communicated. He is surely not mistaken, The exquisite gusto which is his in the physical pleasure of making the clear and exact statements that are so manifest a characteristic of his painting is communicated and is one of the sources of the happiness that shines from his canvases.

But, by and large, Nicholson would rather

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not talk about painting. Words, well, words are . . . he gestures a little helplessly and once more falls to scrubbing and smearing out on the back of a stray piece of cardboard. . . . "Words" . . . he says, with an air of humorous deprecation (for, the soul of courtesy, he remembers that he is addressing a writer), "words, with all due respect to your craft, come *second*. Happy is he who can survive their discovery! Consider children. They draw before they can read, much less write. Directly they can write it tends, alas, to be all up with them as artists. Something's gone, probably lost for ever". He chuckles a little mischievously — though his mischief is, as usual, benign — and the writer finds himself recognizing that there is something of the extremely sophisticated child about the figure on the opposite side of the table, who, bent once more to his precious piece of cardboard, scrubs and smears out, scrubs and smears out with the secret and smiling industry of an angelic urchin intent on a surreptitious portrait of some less likeable "grown-up".

None the less the writer has with an equal surreptitiousness succeeded in getting down some stray observations on the art and its practice let fall by the figure on the other side of the table, and here inserts them for the light they shed on this painter and his approach to his art.

Nicholson considers much may be learned from a period of teaching in an art school. But that period must be — as his at a London Art school was — brief: "long enough (and only long enough) to bring up one brood of chickens — for after one brood the teacher is likely to become stale! Yes, much is to be learned, for each pupil is likely to suffer from some sort of little disease. What each can already do he or she will always be inclined to do, and thus avoid learning what is essential to a full practice of the art". For "whatever the student intends ultimately to do he must first learn the notes of the instrument and complete control of them". This applies, for instance, to draughtsmanship. "A beginner must learn to draw even if — since it is a fact that a man may be a good draughtsman and a bad artist — he ever afterwards avoids 'good drawing' because his main interest lies elsewhere". Good drawing has, however, great value if, that's to say, it has a

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capacity to make the line talk. Much may be gained from making copies of masterpieces of Old Masters, for thus "you get into touch with the very vision of the painter. I, for instance, as a young painter, made several copies of Velasquez. Especially I remember doing a copy of his wonderful *Admiral Palido Pareja*. What I particularly learned to appreciate and get on terms with from so doing was the *ease* with which so distinguished a mind made its statements".

Then, again, much is to be gained from a careful analysis, whilst copying, of an object of special admiration. "Look at Uccello's *Rout of S. Romano* (in the National Gallery): how beautifully considered that is! I believe that no single lance could shift position by one fraction without endangering this perfect pattern. Yet the picture as a whole has, as all good pictures have, an air of having been executed with the utmost ease. But, then, how he enjoyed his subject. Yes, you've got to be more in love with your subject than with yourself. You've got wholly to forget self". And again: "How incredibly accurate are the tones of Pieter Breughel! You remember that wonderful *Winter* of his? There's realism for you! — realism under the finest control. See how sweetly snow tone gradates until it joins horizon". And then, after a pause: "Painting isn't only sight, it's knowledge. In addition, it is capacity to remember, a capacity amounting at times to ability. You say that you like my *City Dinner?* Good! I enjoyed myself very much — yes, indeed! After brief preliminary exchanges between myself and my nearest neighbours, we each discovered a want of interest in the other, and I a prodigious fascination in the scene before me. I drank a bottle of very fine white wine and in due course smoked an excellent cigar, and all the while I was enjoying these I gazed at the scene and took mental notes until I had it all by heart — until, in fact, I'd painted the scene in my head. When I got back to Apple Tree Yard, where I then lived, I didn't go to bed, but set to at once and got the substance of the thing down. You like it? Yes, I consider it rather a success".

Tone is one of his special preoccupations. "It is a subject very difficult to discuss — the very term tone is excessively difficult to define.

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It isn't colour. It is a quality in common between colours, and among colours I, of course, include black and white. Tone exists when by reason of this common quality everything in your picture sings in harmony". It has other properties beside this capacity to establish a sort of visual lyricism. "It is truth to tone which enables you to put your hand into a Velasquez portrait past the head. But to secure it is not easy. What is really exciting for the realist painter — using the term realist in the sense agreed — is the fact that he has only white with which to give the equivalent in terms of his material of the brightest light. If you think that over, you'll find it means rendering all other colours so that your white shall sing".

Pattern is to him, roughly speaking, black and white content, and "the value of the pattern depends on the interestingness of the shape and relative placings of the darks to the light". The interestingness is present when the eye is buoyantly carried over the entire canvas. Such buoyancy of carriage is in Nicholson due to his ability to provoke and satisfy the eye by a sort of continual and various salute, an ingenious give-and-take between the lights, now massed and now dispersed, and the carefully balanced distribution of the darks. As has been shrewdly suggested elsewhere (*William Nicholson*, Benn's Contemporary British Artists Series), so subtle is the artist that these elements of light and dark appear to be worked simultaneously "as if with a light and dark brush in either hand".

This felicity is not, however, the result of a mere manual dexterity — though Nicholson paints with a greater fluency, accuracy and subtlety than most of us speak (brush or crayon is a sort of tongue for him) — but, as he himself has emphasized in the extract from his conversation given above, of knowledge accumulated from prolonged experience and continual judgment. Good painting to him is predominantly the faculty to make clear statements of the reason he has selected his subject and of his joy in recording it. And decision and accuracy of statement is the result of a constant, carefully cultivated and indefatigable habit of assessment.

Nicholson, in fact, as the writer has observed, never seems during his working hours (save in

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conversation — and not always then) to cease from a double activity: a simultaneous dwelling of the eye upon what interests or may interest it, and a mental assessment in terms of graphic significance of what the eye receives. Everywhere he goes the visible is to him a sort of vast, various, delightful and endlessly interesting book, written in a tongue partially comprehensible and which he is busy rendering by means of sensibility, intelligence and experience into his own language. This study, extremely deliberate during painting or taking notes for an intended picture, is in daily life become (though originally just a bent) so much a habit as to assume the unconsciousness of a powerful instinct. So, too, with the fingers. Some people can't help whistling or humming under their breath, and this activity is a sign that all is well or approximately well with them. The writer would begin to feel uneasy if during the next quarter of an hour Nicholson shouldn't — but without glancing at his paper (anything from a block to the back of an envelope) — begin to develop that soliloquy in which his black crayon is for ever indulging.

Yes, it is quite impossible for Nicholson to be idle. And this constancy of activity, it may be hazarded, springs less from a feeling of moral obligation toward his wonderful gifts and accumulated experience than from sheer primitive delight in what his eyes bring him and the pleasure that is his in tackling the problems of statement presented. That delight, as the years have gone by, led him more and more away from the low and sometimes even sombre keys toward a gamut serene and gay. That gaiety is always quiet — he is a supremely tactful artist — and is often characterized by something elusive and in the highest degree personal: a sort of exquisite lightness of wit originating in the capacity to surprise, a capacity which owes its power, as wit anywhere mostly does, to a genius for unerring selection and exact emphasis. It is this wit — a wit not the least "literary" and expressing itself largely in pertinency of pattern — which gives his pictures much of their cool vivacity and that quality which in the man himself expresses itself in a certain playful dandyism of dress. (Nicholson affects a certain style, always charming and congruous, in which the initiate can discern discreet allusions to the raffish

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gentlemanly-sporting "masher" of the nineties.) Though "a Nicholson", albeit surrounded by twenty other paintings, can be instantly recognized across a room on first entry to a gallery, this personal vision of his has never become stereotyped. Consider, for instance *The Stack, Hall's Fields* (plate 7). This glimpse of the transitory, worthy to be placed by a Constable of the last period, had no forebears and has had to date no successors. Its existence bears witness how seriously Nicholson takes his motto (uttered with a friendly grin and a flourish of the crayon): "*It's the next thing that matters*". What this motto implies in practice is further illustrated by the following anecdote. Toward the close of his late exhibition (visited by 11,000 persons), at the National Gallery, Nicholson made a tour of the rooms. "There was over forty years' work represented. It didn't seem to me so bad. In fact I was, generally speaking, rather pleased with it. But I said to myself: 'One never knows. Maybe I'm now a back-number. Perhaps I'm repeating myself'. And on that I went straight home and I set myself the hardest possible problem I could find. It entailed between two and three months' solid painting. Every day I'd say to myself, 'There — I've got it', and every morning I'd come down and see I hadn't. Yes, it was a real jaw-cracker. But I think I've got it".

So he has laboured and continues to labour. And if an attempt is to be made to sum the impression conveyed by his work, surely the impression is one of happiness. Take, for instance, the *Diana Low* (plate 31). The spectator can delight and keep on delighting in the wonderful painting of the subject's clothes, the masterly freshness of the flesh-tones in the sunlit face, the amazing rendering of the eyes with the light passing sideways through them . . . but, when all this has been noted and enjoyed, and noted and enjoyed anew, it is at long last what the picture as a whole is saying that is so ravishing. And what it is saying is that the mere *sight* of such youth, courage and character as this young woman so evidently possesses is *happiness*. Nicholson always speaks of tones "singing"; it is the only "literary" expression this writer has ever heard him use in connection with his art. And for once a "literary" term is well justified. His pictures do in effect

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"sing", and the song, however various, has ever the same burthen. Nicholson's life has not been without sorrows — more sorrows, perhaps, than attend most lives — and it is surely not to be supposed that so sensitive an artist has not felt their weight at least as heavily as would a less gifted mortal. But it is also to be remarked, as thoroughly characteristic of him, that his courage, modesty, and generosity have been such that he has kept his sorrow to himself and consecrated only his happiness to the increasers of ours.

Editor's Note. This essay was completed by Mr Nichols shortly before his death.

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PLATES

1. GLASS JUG AND FRUIT (1938), 14×18, *oil;* Owner, Rt. Hon. Vincent Massey.
2. QUEEN VICTORIA (1893), $9\frac{1}{2}\times 9$, *woodcut;* Owner, The Artist.
3. PIRATE TWINS—HOW TO PLAY (1922), $5\frac{1}{10}\times 7\frac{2}{5}$, *Indian ink and gouache;* Owner, Miss Lillian Browse.
4. MORRIS DANCERS (1901), $21\times 14\frac{1}{4}$, *oil;* Owner, J. N. Bryson, Esq.
5. THE MARQUIS WELLINGTON JUG (1920), 14×12, *oil;* Owner, Miss Vivien Leigh.
6. W. E. HENLEY (1900), 15×12, *oil;* Owner, The Tate Gallery.
7. THE STACK, HALL'S FIELDS (1928), 13×16, *oil;* Owner, Roland, Browse & Delbanco.
8. MRS STAFFORD OF PARADISE ROW (1906), 30×25, *oil;* Owner, Captain the Viscount Cowdray.
9. MISS SIMPSON'S BOOTS (1919), $20\frac{1}{2}\times 28\frac{1}{4}$, *oil;* Owner, The Lady Marjorie Stirling.
10. THE LOWESTOFT BOWL (1911), 19×24, *oil;* Owner. The Tate Gallery.
11. GIRL IN PINK DRESS (1935), $23\frac{3}{8}\times 21\frac{5}{8}$, *oil;* Owner, Birmingham City Art Gallery.
12. GIRL WITH THE TATTERED GLOVE (1909), 34×27, *oil;* Owner, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
13. BLACK SWANS AT CHARTWELL (1932), $12\frac{1}{2}\times 16$, *oil;* Owner, Mrs Winston Churchill
14. SPORTS ON THE CEDRIC (1921), $16\frac{1}{2}\times 22\frac{1}{2}$, *oil;* Owner T. Milligan Grundy, Esq.

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15. HARBOUR IN SNOW, LA ROCHELLE (1938), 14×18, *oil;* Owner, A. D. Peters, Esq.
16. MISS JEKYLL (1920), 30×30, *oil;* Owner, The Tate Gallery.
17. SNOW AT BRETTON PARK (1939), 18×15, *oil;* Owner, Mrs Hanbury-Kelk.
18. WILTSHIRE PASTORAL (1934), $12\frac{1}{2}\times15\frac{1}{2}$, *oil;* Owner, Mrs H. M. Drew.
19. OLIVER LOW (1922), $23\frac{1}{2}\times21\frac{1}{2}$, *oil;* Owner, Oliver Low, Esq.
20. PROFESSOR SAINTSBURY (1925), $25\frac{1}{2}\times20$, *oil;* Owner, Merton College, Oxford.
21. MUSHROOMS (1940), $13\frac{1}{4}\times17\frac{3}{8}$, *oil;* Owner, The Tate Gallery.
22. THE LOBSTER (1924), *oil;* Size and Owner Unknown.
23. SUNFLOWERS (1920), 16×13, *oil;* Owner, W. W. Lawrence, Esq.
24. WALTER GREAVES (1917), $75\times56\frac{1}{2}$, *oil;* Owner, Manchester City Art Gallery.
25. THE GOLD JUG (1937), 16×13, *oil;* Owner, Her Majesty the Queen.
26. STUDIO IN SNOW, SUTTON VENY (1924), $21\times22\frac{1}{2}$, *oil;* Owner, Eardley Knollys, Esq.
27. MATADERO, SEGOVIA (1935), 15×18, *oil;* Owner, E. Vincent Harris, Esq.
28. LORD AND LADY STRAFFORD (1940), 39×49, *oil;* Owner, The Earl of Strafford.
29. PLAZA DE TOROS, MALAGA (1935), $25\frac{1}{2}\times30\frac{1}{4}$, *oil;* Owner, Miss Lena Ramsden.
30. DR A. C. BENSON (1924), $22\times25\frac{5}{8}$, *oil;* Owner, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
31. DIANA LOW (1933), 25×23, *oil;* Owner, Mrs R. C. Tuely.
32. CITY DINNER (1932), 21×24, *oil;* Owner, H. Sacher, Esq.

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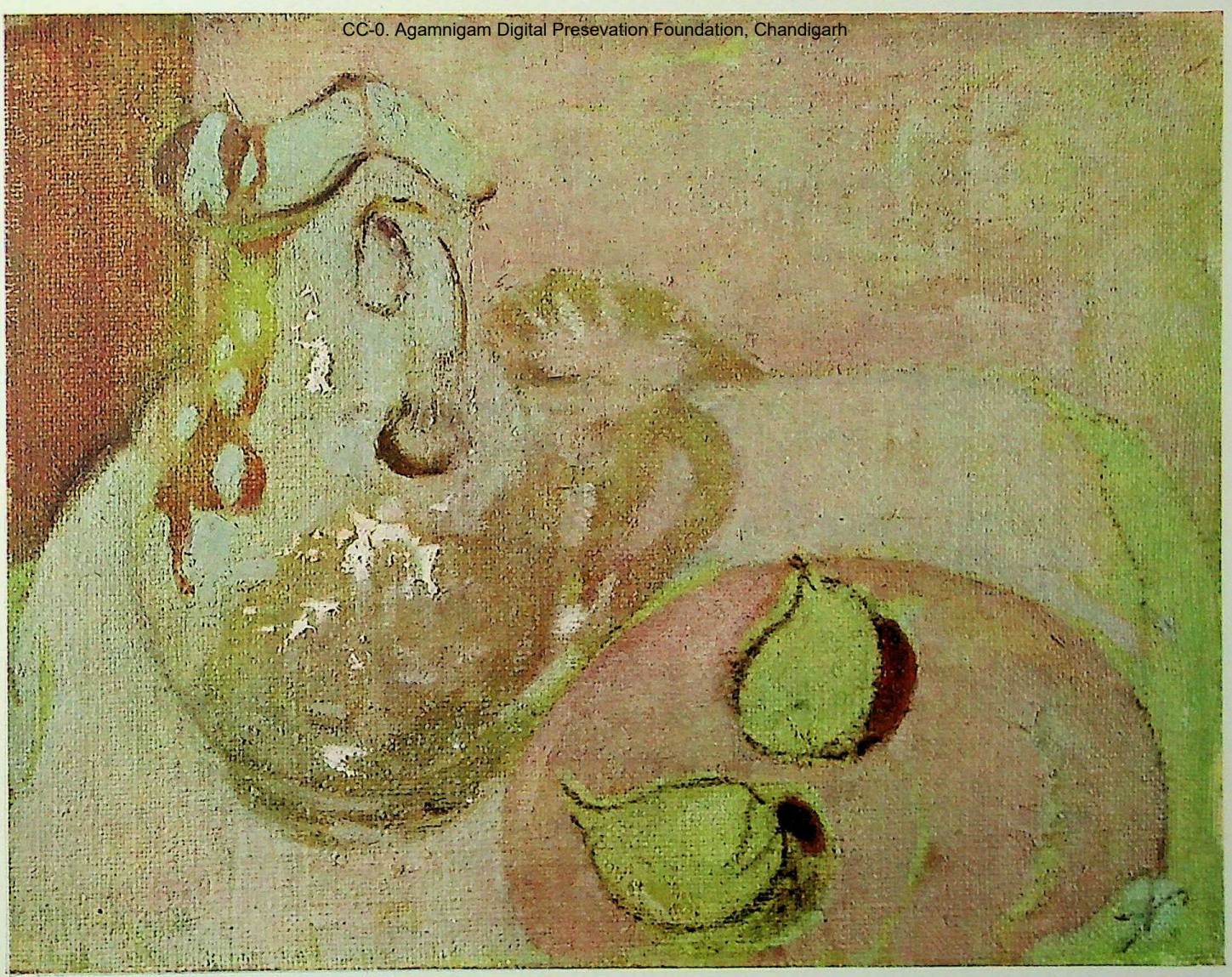

Plate 1 Glass Jug and Fruit 1938

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Plate 2 Queen Victoria 1893

Plate 3 PIRATE TWINS—HOW TO PLAY 1922

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Plate 4 MORRIS DANCERS 1901

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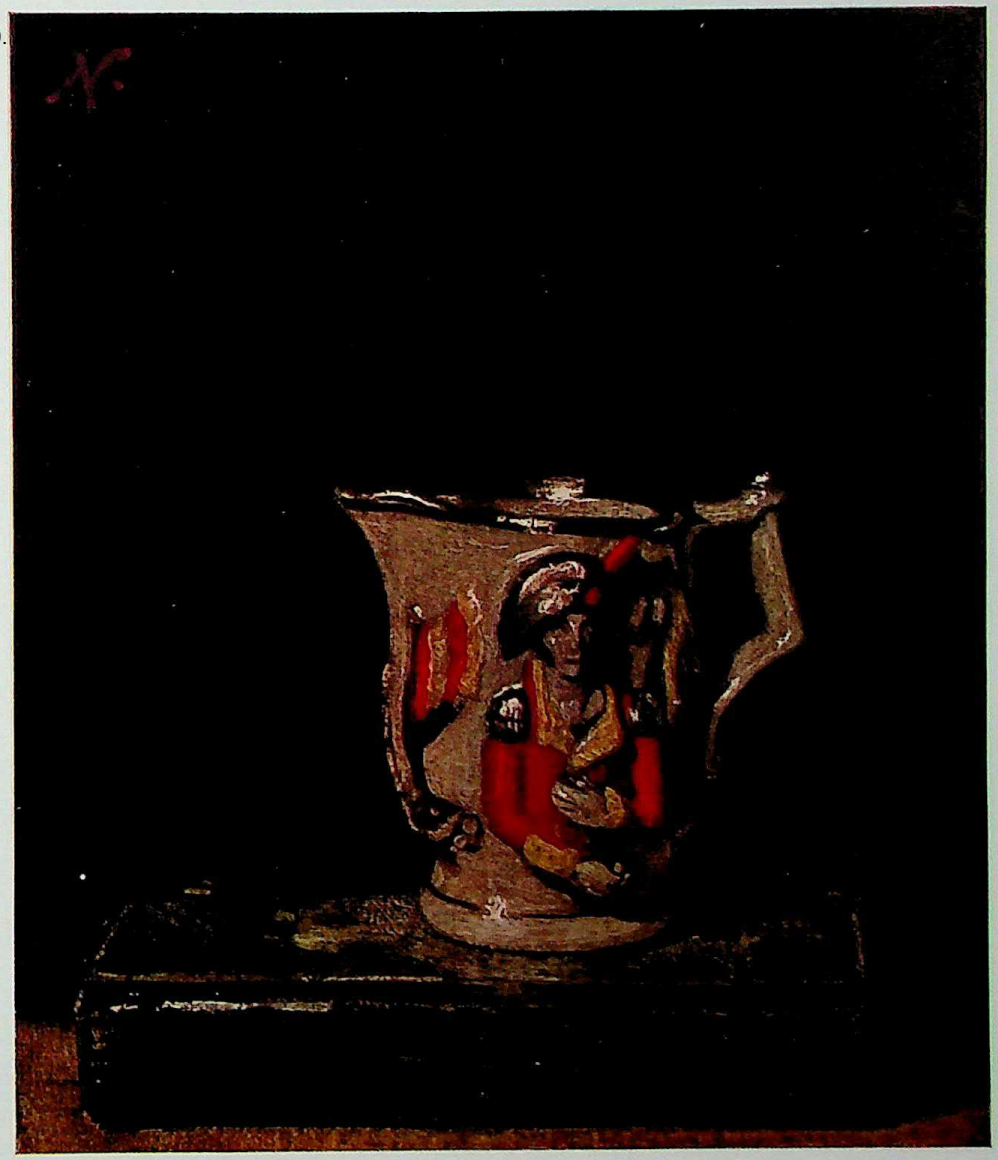

Plate 5 The "Marquis" Wellington Jug 1920

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Plate 6 W. E. Henley 1900

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Plate 7 THE STACK, HALLS FIELDS 1928

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Plate 8 Mrs. Stafford of Paradise Row 1906

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Plate 9 Miss Simpson's Boots 1919

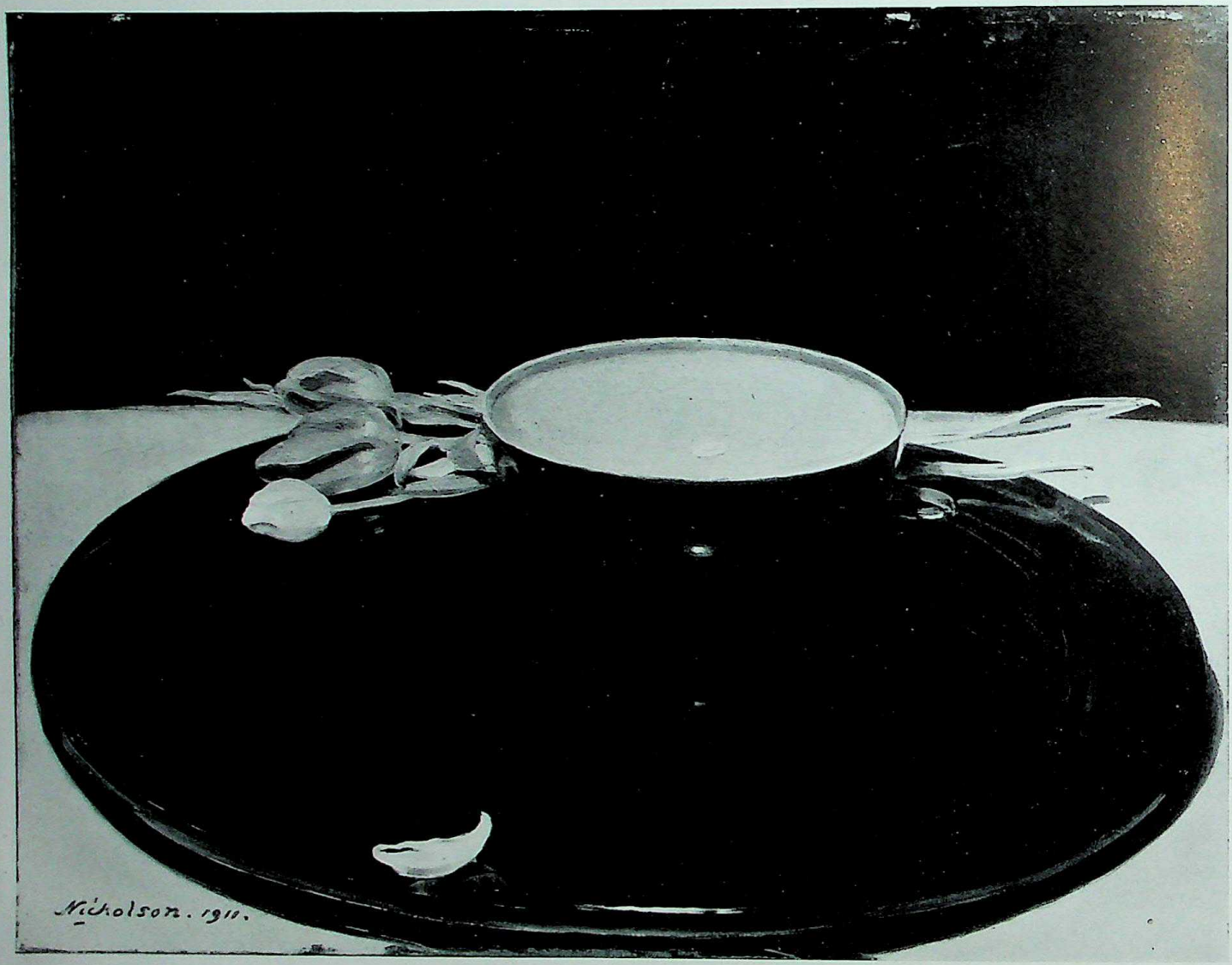

Plate 10 THE LOWESTOFT BOWL 1911

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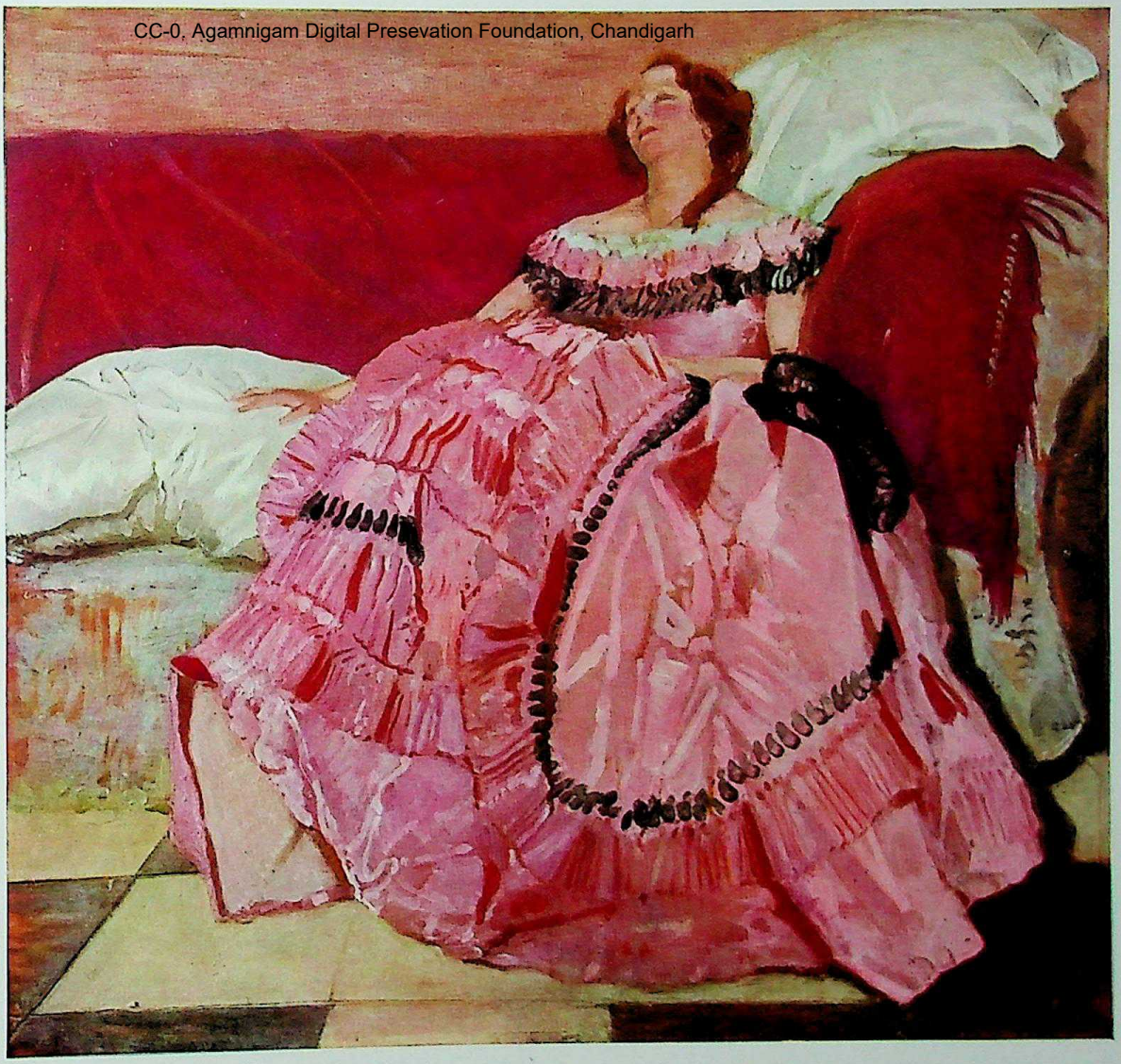

Plate 11 GIRL IN PINK DRESS 1935

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Plate 12 Girl with the Tattered Glove 1909

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Plate 13 Black Swans at Chartwell 1932

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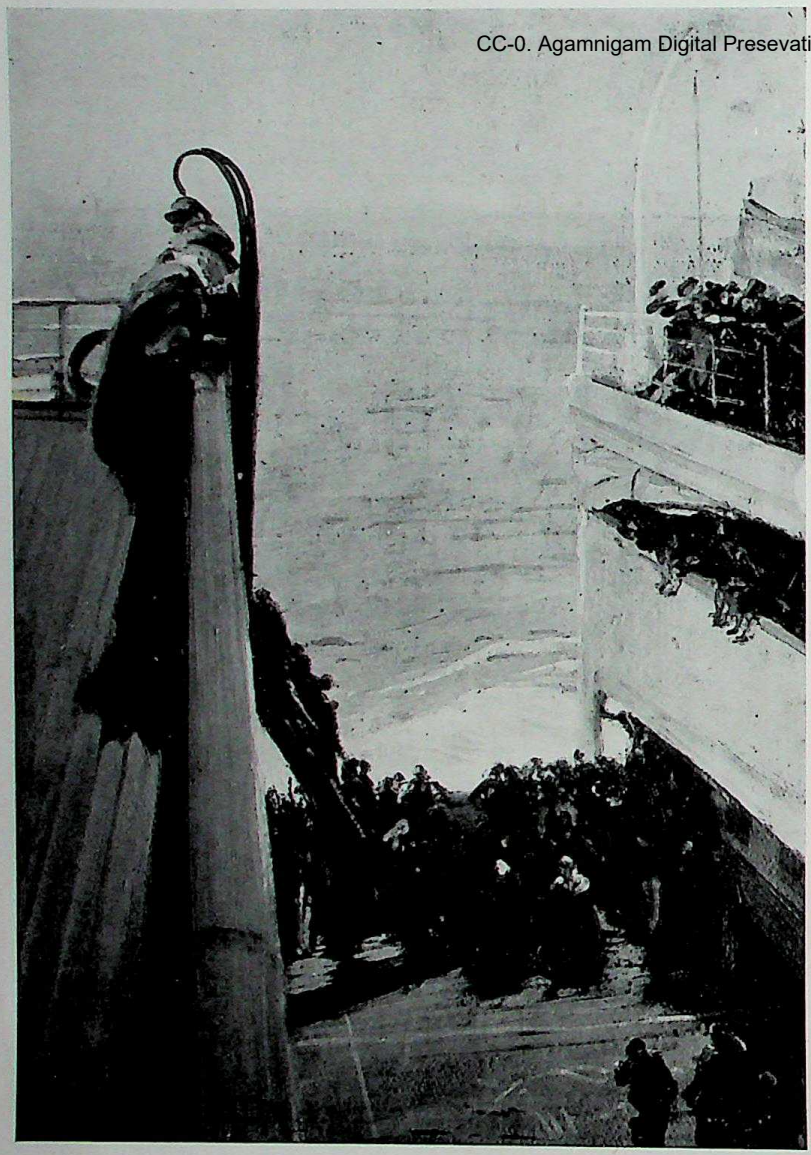

Plate 14 Sports on the Cedric 1921

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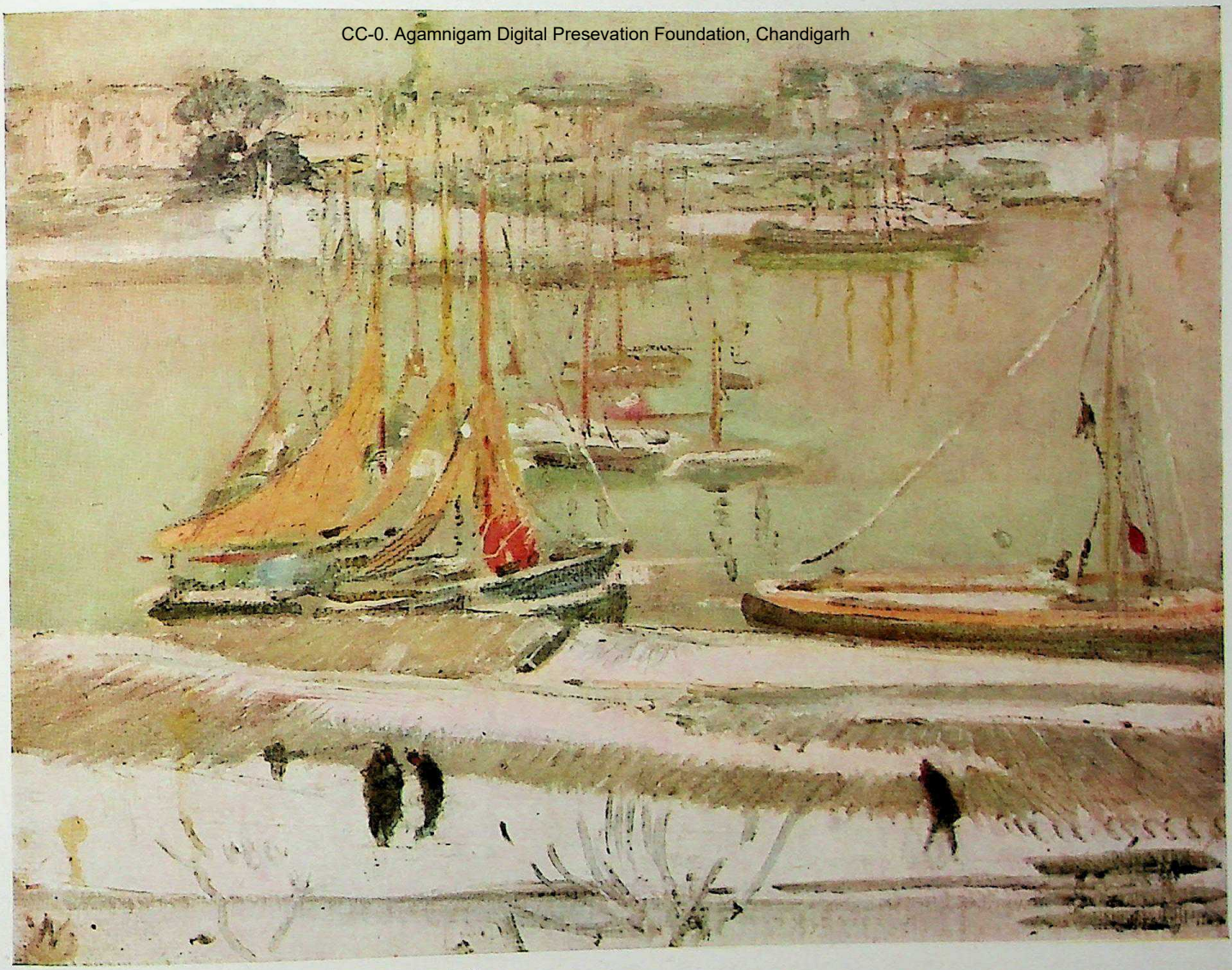

Plate 15 Harbour in Snow, La Rochelle 1938

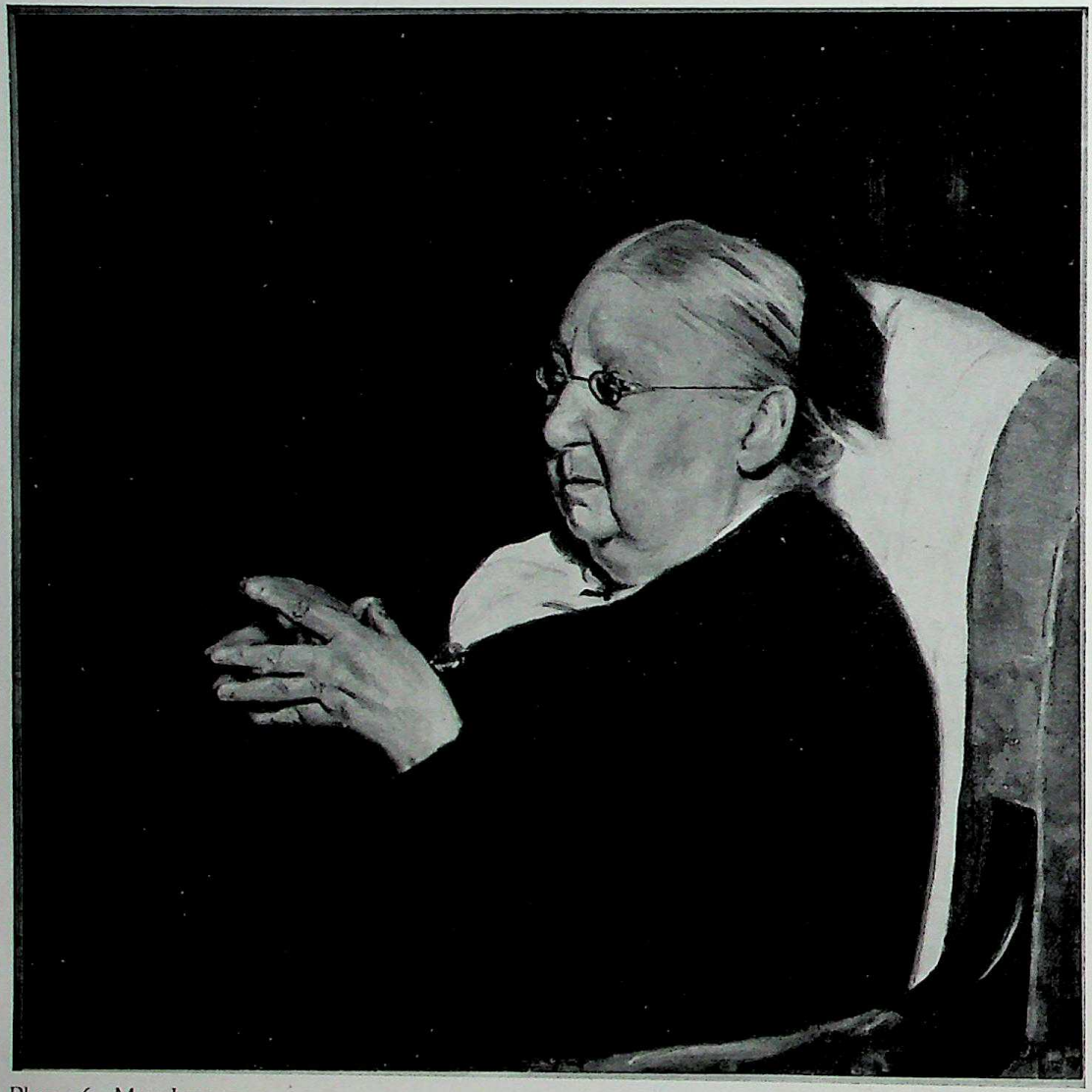

Plate 16 Miss Jekyll 1920

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Plate 17 Snow at Bretton Park 1939

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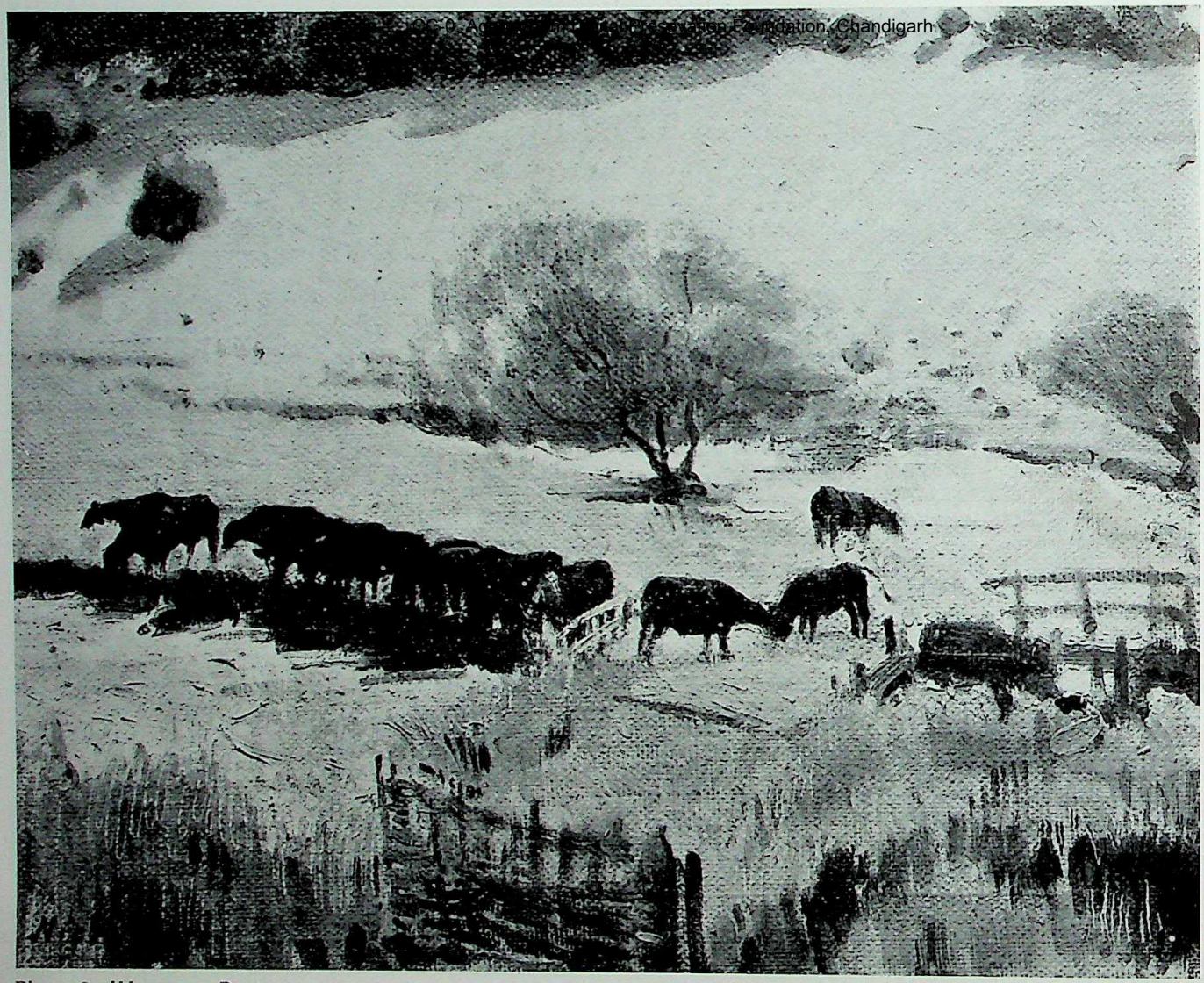

Plate 18 WILTSHIRE PASTORAL 1934

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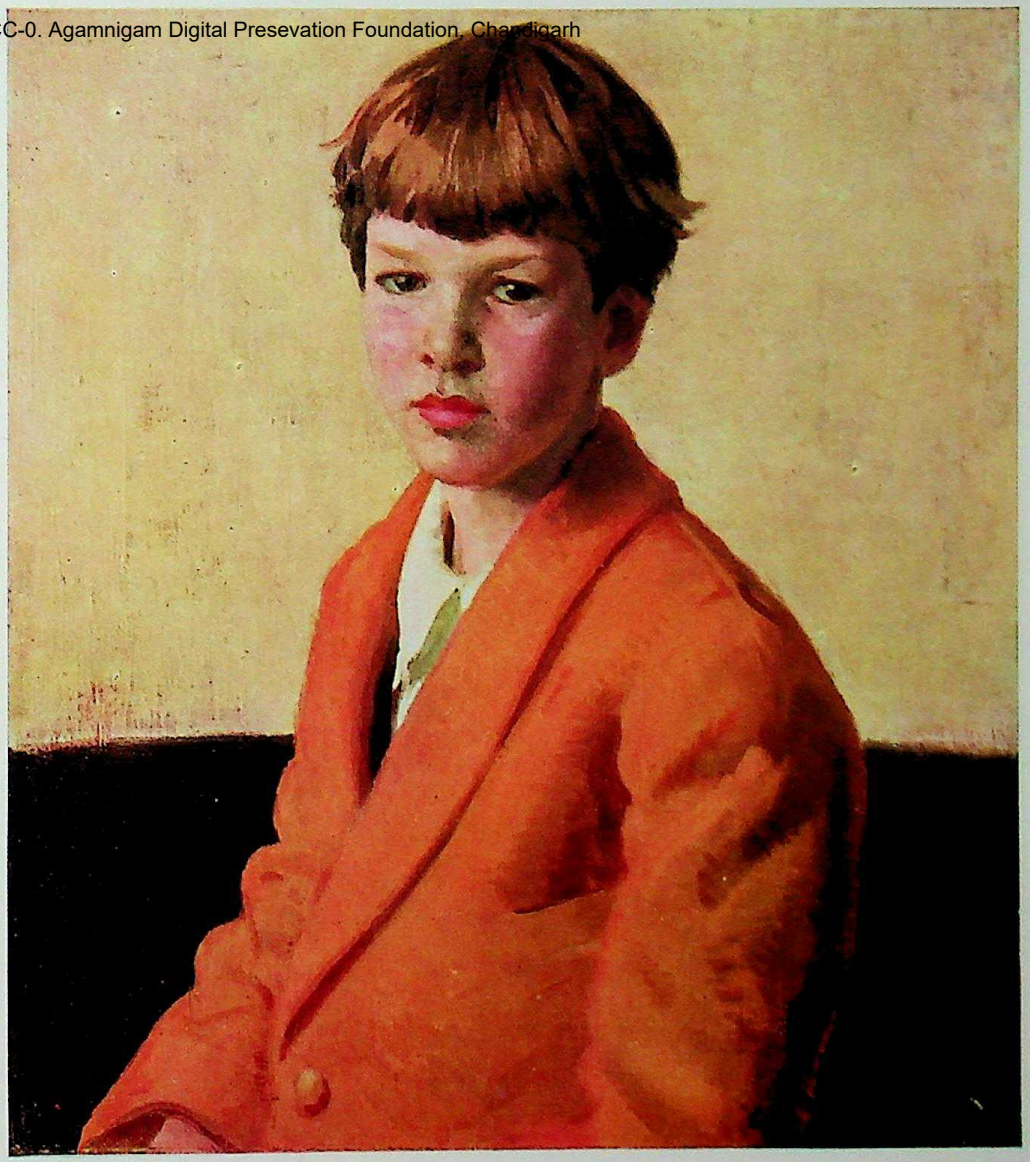

Plate 19 Oliver Low 1922

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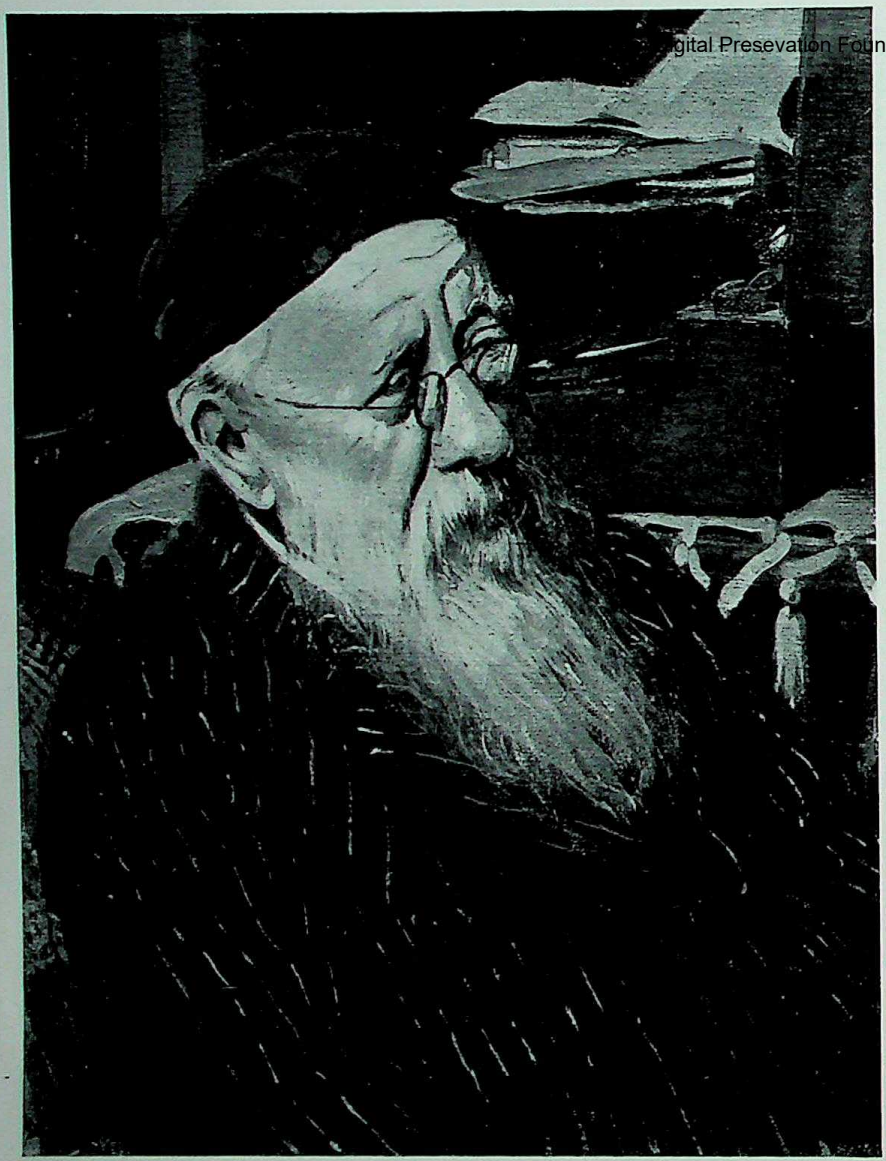

Plate 20 PROFESSOR SAINTSBURY 1925

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Plate 21 MUSHROOMS 1940

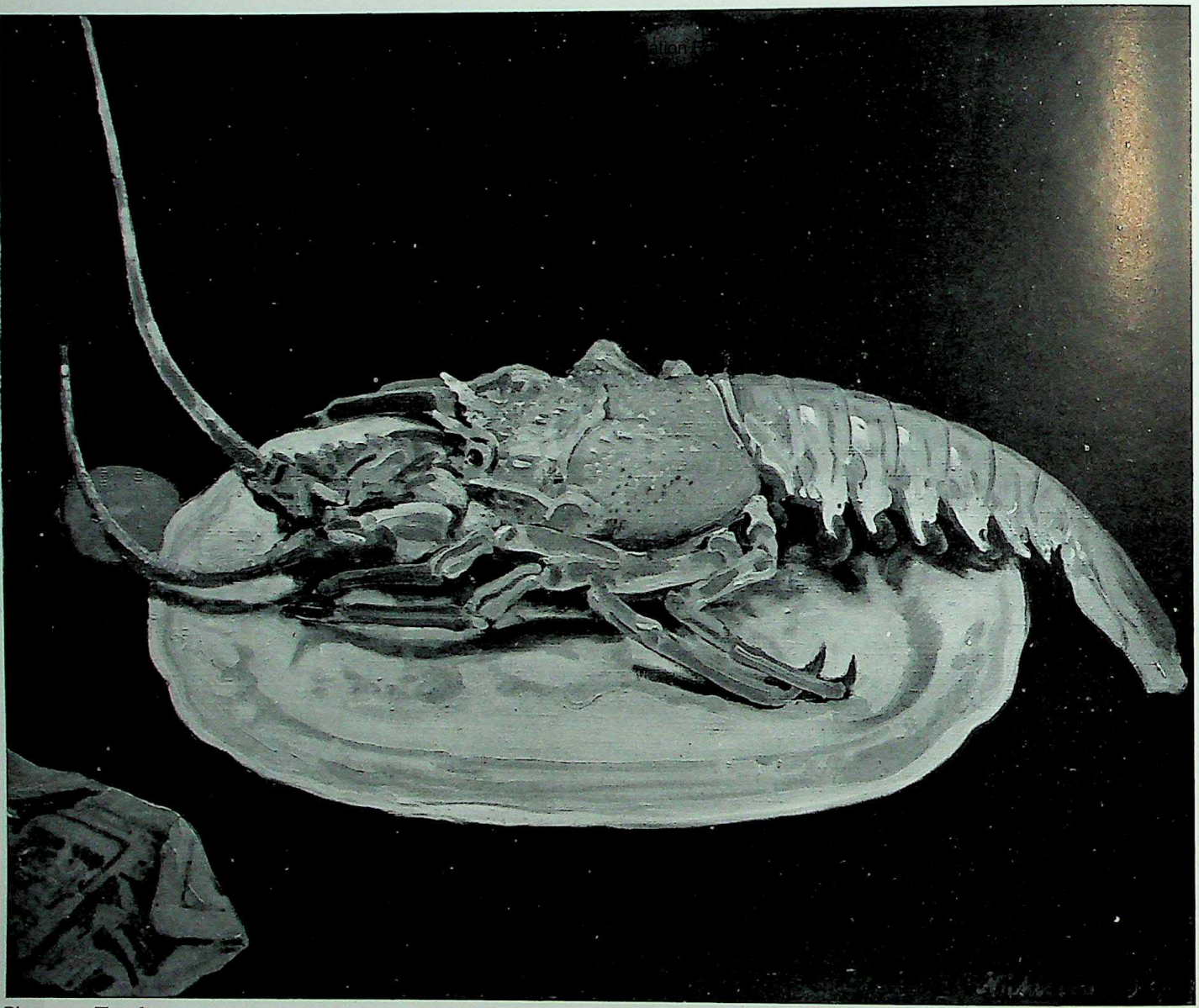

Plate 22 THE LOBSTER 1924

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Plate 23 SUNFLOWERS 1920

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Plate 24 WALTER GREAVES 1917

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Plate 25 THE GOLD JUG 1937

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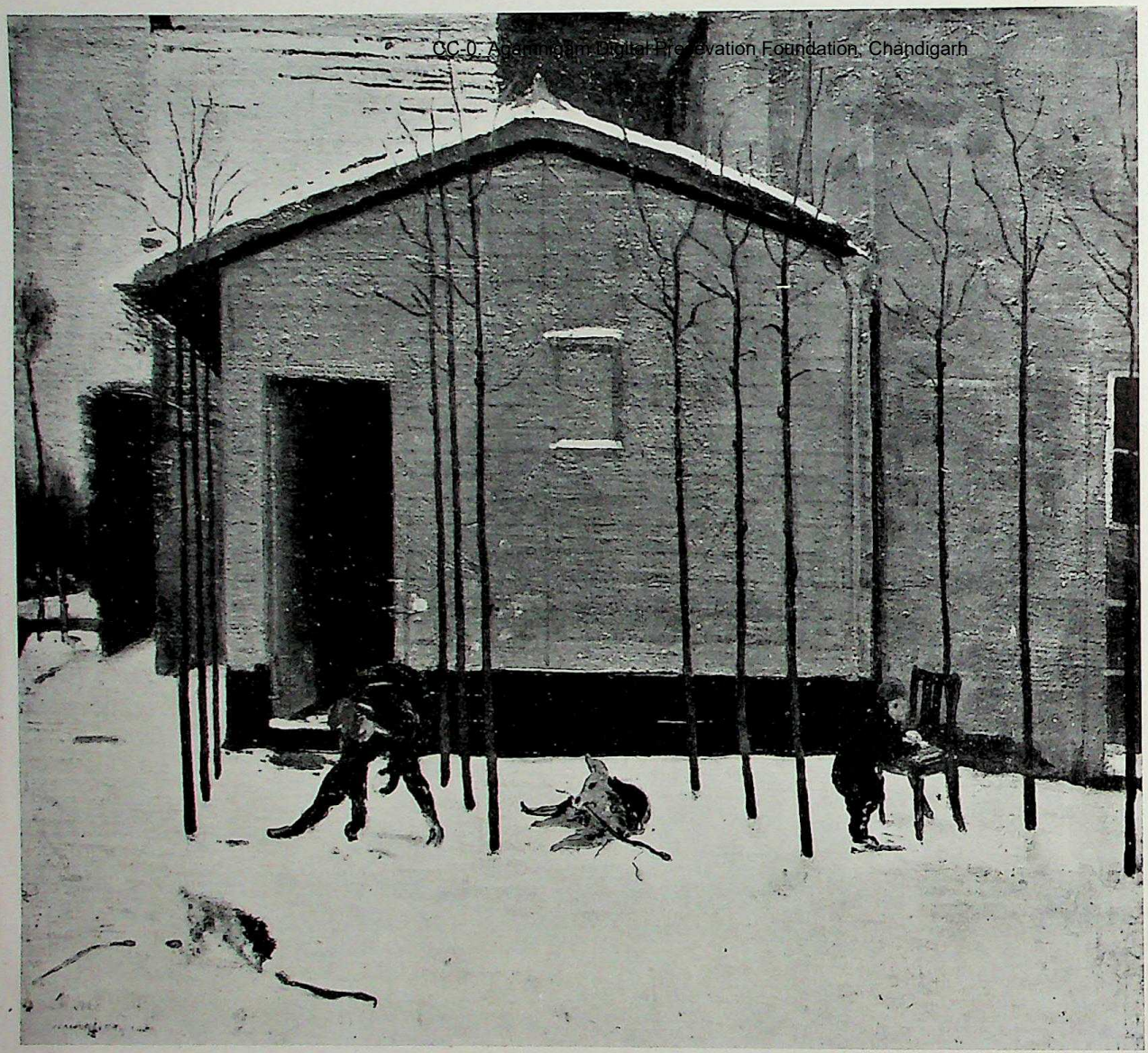

Plate 26 Studio in Snow, Sutton Veny 1924

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Plate 27 MATADERO, SEGOVIA 1935

Plate 28 LORD AND LADY STRAFFORD 1940

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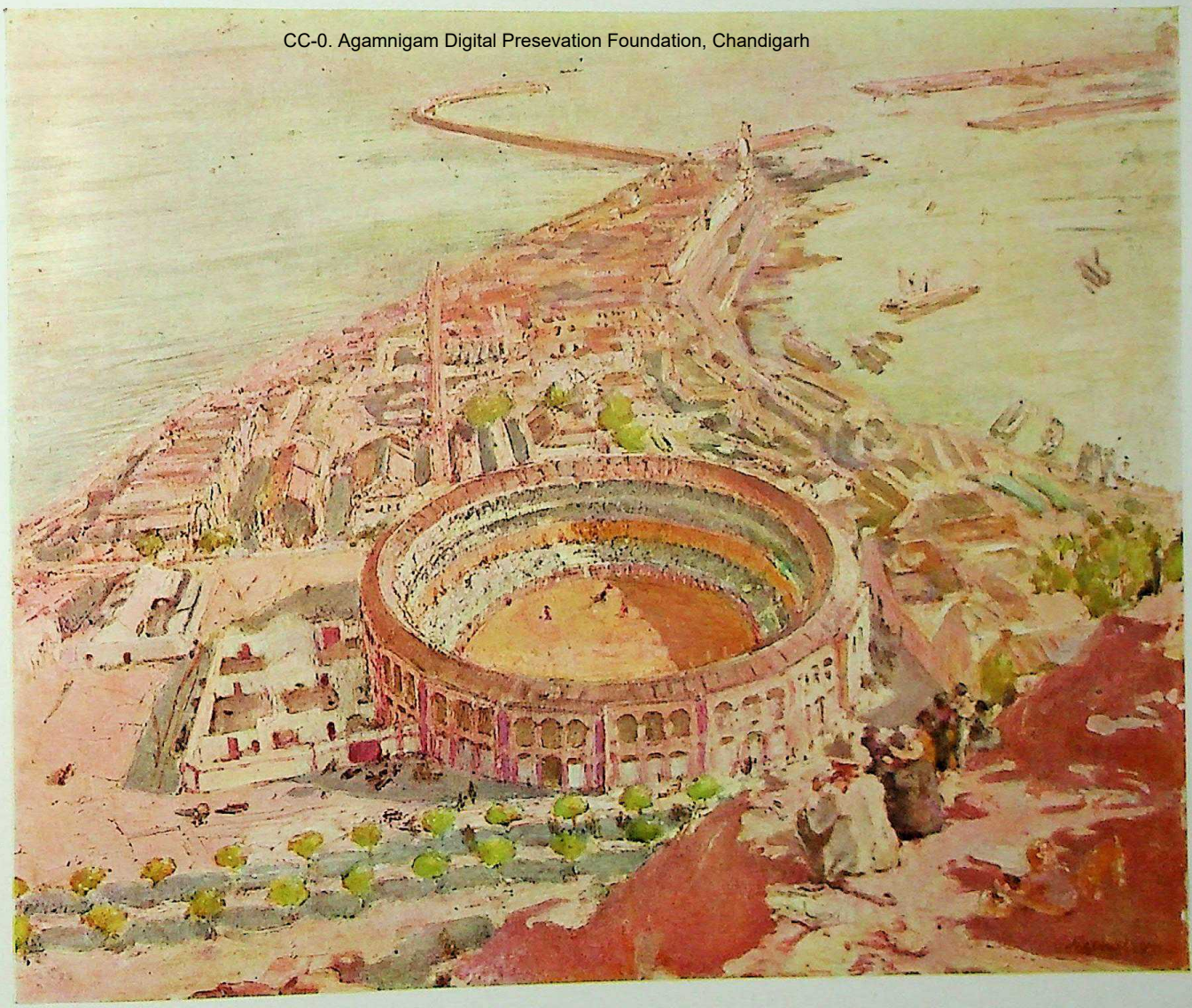

Plate 29 Plaza de Toros, Malaga 1935

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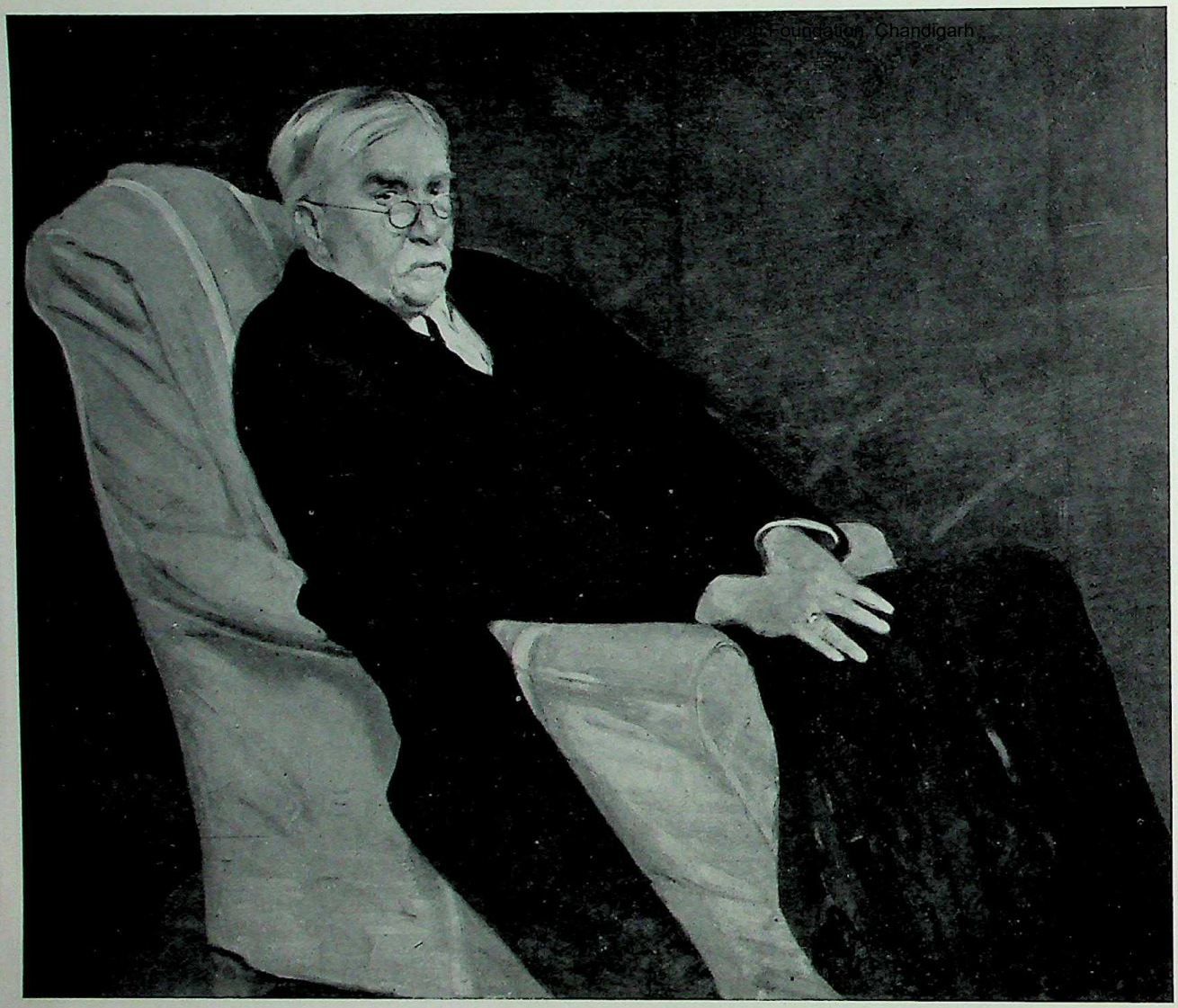

Plate 30 Dr. A. C. Benson 1924

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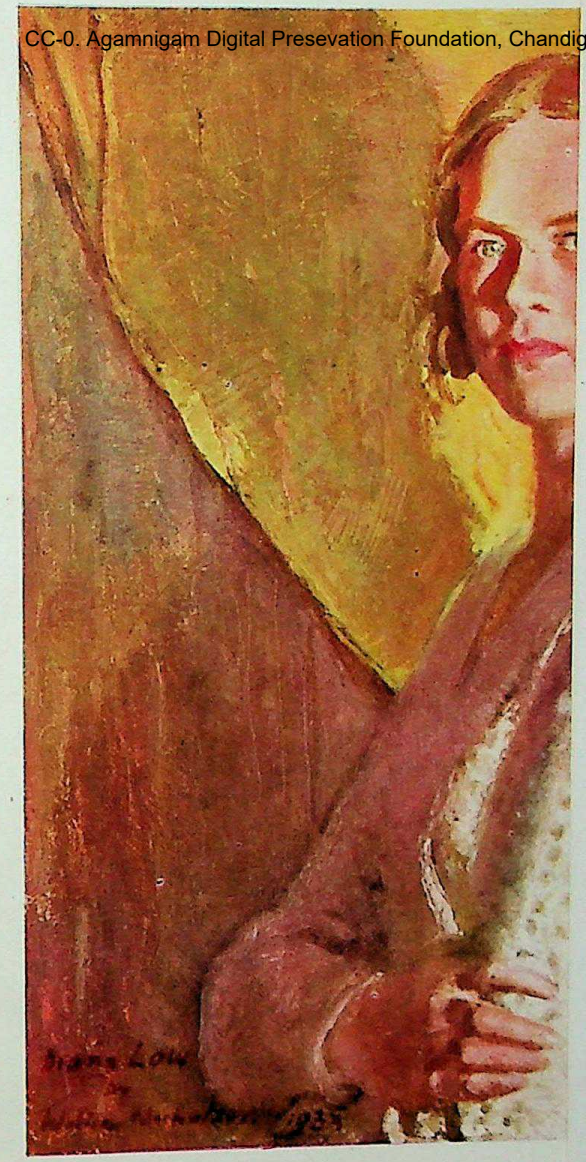

Plate 31 DIANA LOW 1933

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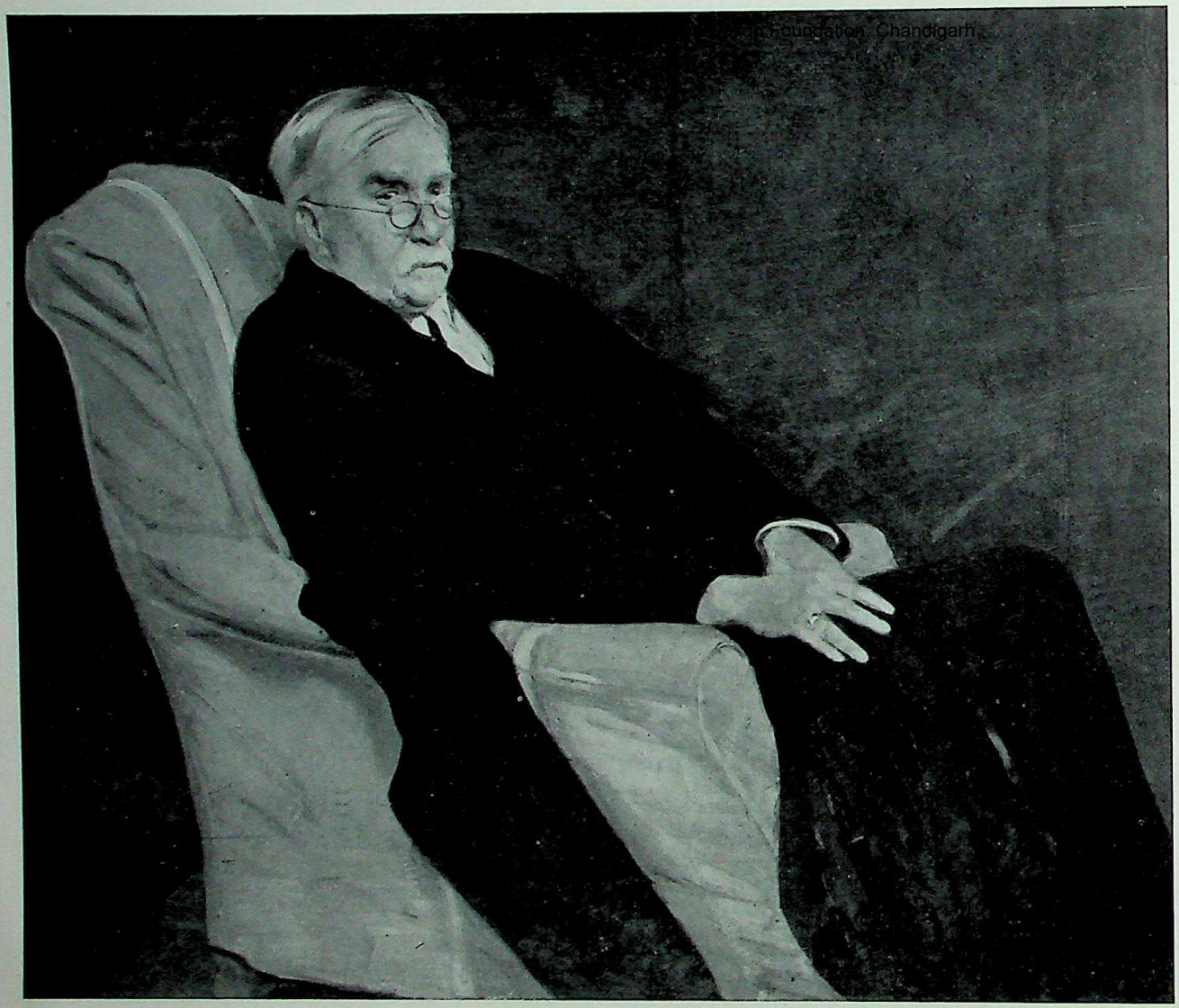

Plate 30 Dr. A. C. Benson 1924

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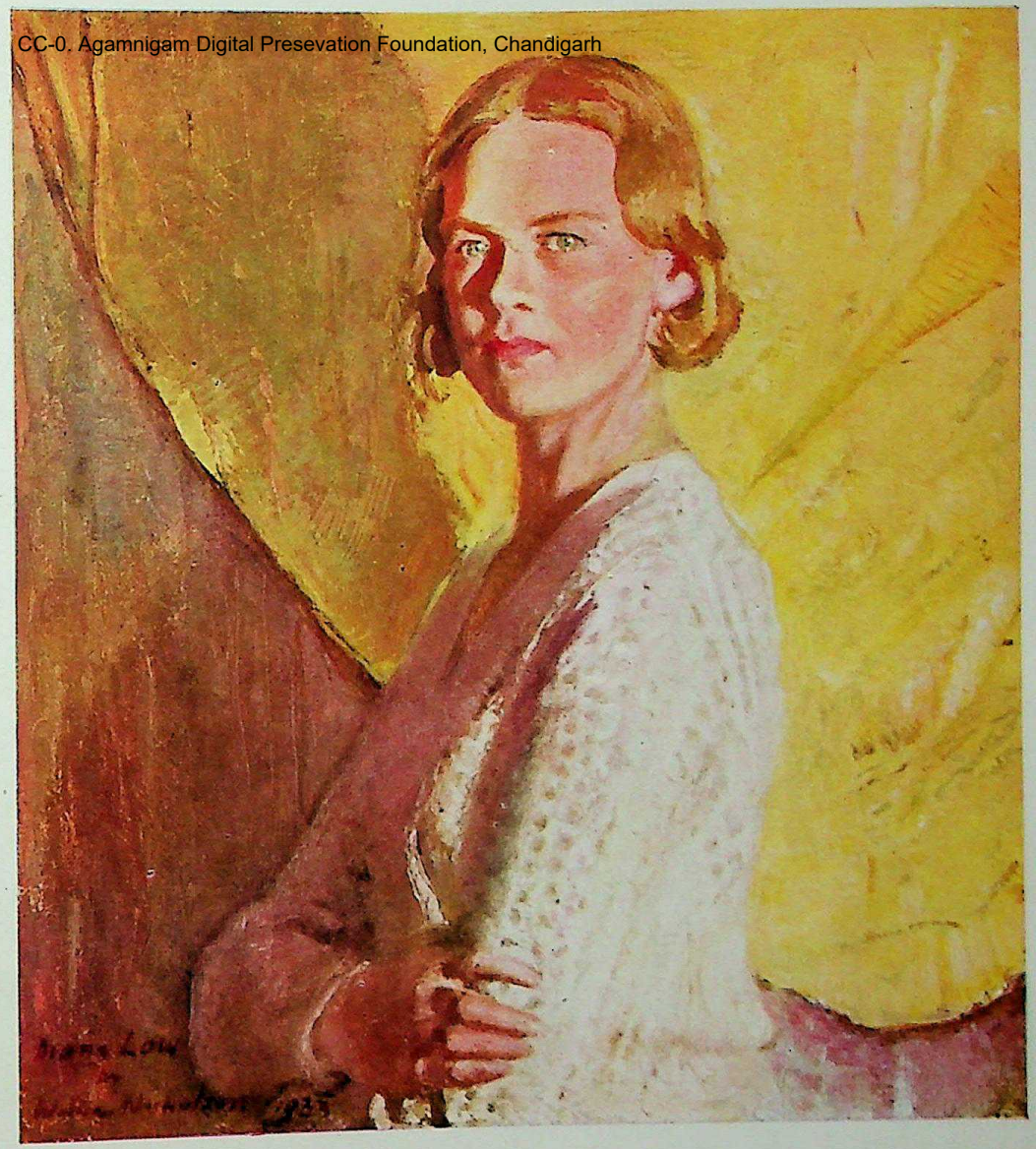

Plate 31 DIANA LOW 1933

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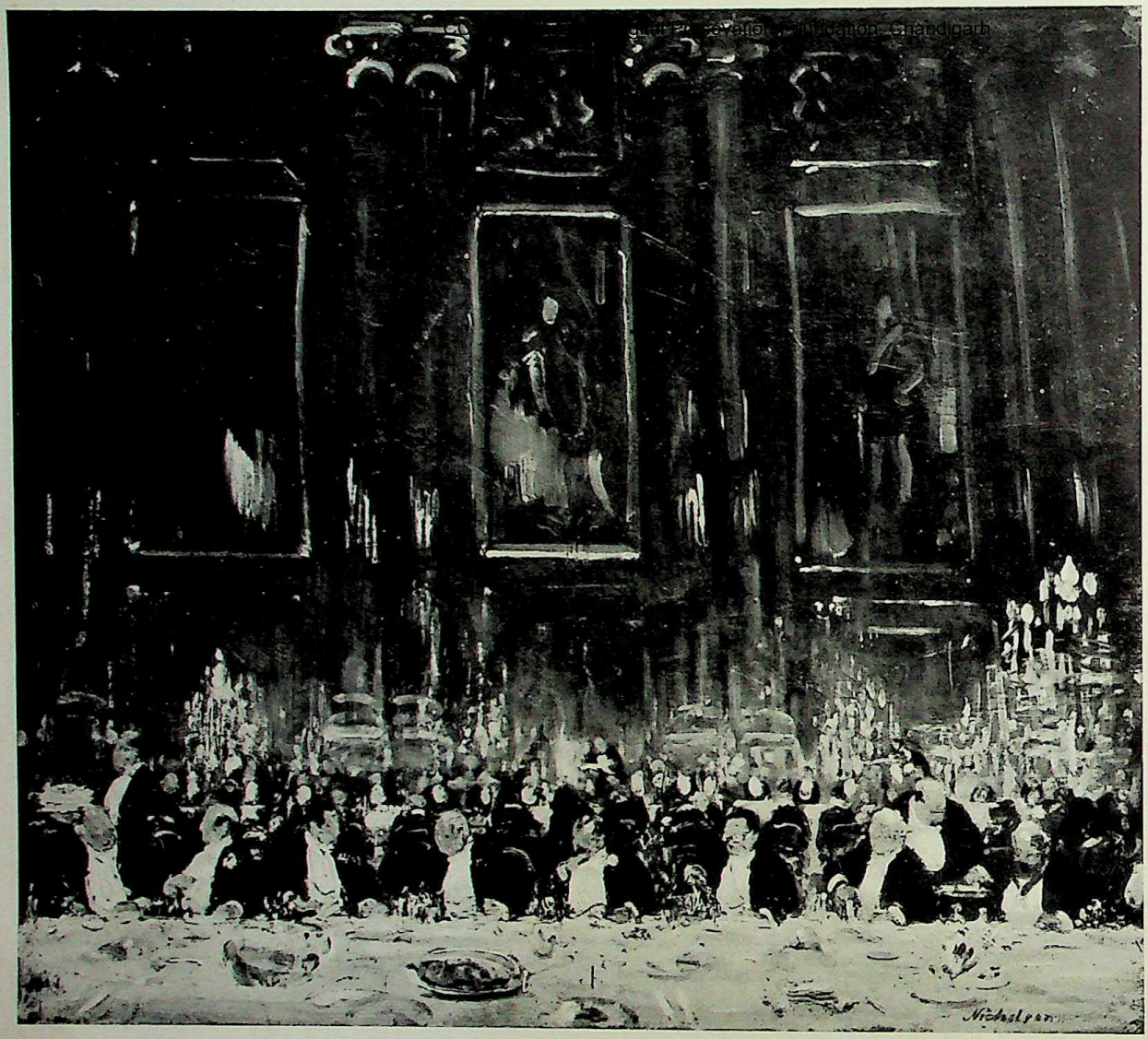

Plate 32 CITY DINNER 1932

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